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ABSTRACT

Use of poetry in advanced college-level classes of English as a second language is discussed, focusing on the oral (acoustic) texture of poems as contrasted with their syntactic, lexical, or figurative qualities. Discussion begins with the characteristics and objectives of the learners in question and the basis in both literary and linguistic theory for using poetry in classroom practice. Three aspects of poetry use (metrics, grammatical devices, rhetorical devices) are explored further and some suggestions are offered for using a specific text, both for its teaching potential and as the object of literary linguistic analysis. Special attention is given to the phonological characteristics of poetry as a teaching tool. Contains 21 references. (MSE)

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The Noises made by Poems: an Exploration of the Use of Poetry in the Advanced English Language Classroom *

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Any poem or poet worthy of the name must liberate the pure creative force of the human voice.

- Anghelos Sikelianos.

Applied Linguistic discussions concerning the structure (stylistics) and classroom use (second language pedagogy) of poetry are strangely silent on the subject of the noises made by poems. By this I mean the acoustic, as opposed to the syntactic, lexical or figurative, texture of texts. Yet, the range of benefits the foreign learner can derive from poetry, in the sphere of oracy, is enormous, extending from oral discussion of grammatical and rhetorical features, to rhythmical reading aloud and the study of metrics as a special case of English intonation. Apart from these practical 'uses' of poems to extend the student's oral and metalinguistic repertoire, there is also the fact that poetry originates in and constantly draws upon the spoken language: "All poetry was originally oral" (Hollander 1989: 4), and, "Some poetry is meant to be sung; most poetry, in modern times, is meant to be spoken" (Eliot 1957: 32). Thus, to ignore the noises made by poems is to deny an essential aspect of their diachronic and synchronic force.

The present paper is concerned with a particular group of (advanced) English language learners and the multiple uses of poetry to cater to their specific needs. Beginning with a brief sketch of the learners and learning targets, I shall proceed to an outline of the theoretical basis of my discussion. This part of the paper will draw on literary as well as applied linguistic theory, but restrict use of the former to writers dealing directly with linguistic matters. Following a more general discussion of the use of poetry in the English language classroom under three headings - metrics, grammatical devices, rhetorical devices - I shall conclude with some suggestions about Auden's "Epilogue", both as a teaching-text and as an

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object of literary linguistic analysis. Most space in each section will be devoted to the phonological aspects of poetry because, as I have already indicated, this is, at present, an under-exploited area in language teaching.

(1.1) Learner profile

Although the learners about to be described may strike the reader as a rather atypical group, whose metalinguistic needs, in particular, may appear unrepresentative of most English language learners, it should be borne in mind that such students attend courses in Britain and Ireland in increasing numbers every year[1]. It should also be noted that many of the techniques outlined below can be used successfully with younger, less sophisticated and less proficient students, though the teacher's choice of texts may be correspondingly restricted.

The learners in question are undergraduates (or occasionally M.A. students), reading English literature in foreign (usually European) universities, who have come to Ireland for three- or four-week E.S.P. courses. In many of their home universities, degrees in English literature include a historical linguistics component[2]. Such students will have studied English for at least six years at school, often supplemented by private lessons, and will have completed at least one year of their degree courses. They will normally have an adequate linguistic metalanguage and a rudimentary literary one. In other words, they will be able to parse an English sentence using the appropriate terminology and will also be acquainted with such terms (and concepts) as metaphor and irony, but not with the more complex reaches of literary criticism and its terminology.

(1.2) Learning targets

Together with a good grounding in the target language and some metalinguistic vocabulary, the students will have a certain degree of stylistic awareness. Their stated needs will often be grammar revision, oral fluency practice, vocabulary development and an improved ability to read and critically discuss literary texts. Grammar revision, at this level, usually means help with recognition and manipulation of aspect and modality in the English verb system, which is an area that can be fruitfully addressed through literary texts (Berman 1984). Lexical development can also be fostered through literary texts (see, for example, Widdowson 1984), and the requisite metalanguage for discussing literature can be taught (Burton and Carter 1982: 5-6). Poetry will be used to enhance the learners' linguistic and literary awareness, with a particular emphasis on phonology.

(2.1) Theoretical basis

The importance of literature, and in particular poetry, to the understanding of language was emphasised by the distinguished linguistic theorist and Russian Formalist, Roman Jakobson, who argued that poetics (the linguistic study of the 'poetic function' of language) was an integral part of linguistics (1960: 486). An even stronger version of this argument has been proposed by Julia Kristeva, who asserts that, "the proper object of linguistic study is poetic language" (1980: 24-5).

In the sphere of Applied Linguistics, there are several advocates of the use of literary text to further the understanding of language. These include Malcolm Coulthard (1977) and Ann Cluysenaar (1976) in the field of Stylistics and H.G.Widdowson (1984), C. Brumfit and R.Carter (1986) and D. Burton and R. Carter (1982) in the area of Second Language Pedagogy. All of these authors have tended to emphasise lexis and ignore phonology, although Cluysenaar does attempt to relate sound patterns to semantics (1976: 64-66). For all these authors, then, the primary use of literary texts in the classroom is for vocabulary-building.

Coulthard mentions the possibility of attending to sound patterns in poetry, but makes no suggestion as to why such a project might be valuable (1977: 170). Instead, he concentrates on literary conversations as a prime case of written discourse, offering a discussion of *Othello* in terms of Grice's principles (1977: 170). In a similar way, Deirdre Burton focuses on some dialogue drawn from Pinter's *Dumb Waiter* (1982: 89-107) The suggestion appears to be that literary representations of spoken discourse, however stylised, are somehow more authentic, or more susceptible to analysis, than other modes of writing.

Finally, Brumfit and Carter (1986: 6-7) argue that striking sound patterns are not really a distinguishing feature of poetry because 'ordinary language' such as proverbs, nursery rhymes and advertisements, can furnish examples of sound patterning. Unfortunately, two of their three examples originate in pre-literacy (as defined by Ong 1982 or Havelock 1986; see also Attridge 1982: 80), while the third relies on memorability in much the same way as these pre-literate oral texts. The connection between oral texts and poems is an important one, as we shall see, but it does not negate the primacy of sound to poetry; indeed, it underlines it.

The above schematic outline of the various theoretical positions in Stylistics and Second Language Pedagogy is intended to illustrate the following point. Many theoreticians and practitioners are very aware that literature is a major resource in second language learning, but their

proposals for exploiting it are somewhat restricted. Among the many uses of literature in second language teaching is training learners to pay close attention to stress and intonation. Literary language may be deviant in terms of both lexis and syntax, but it is difficult, if not impossible, to think of an example of rhythmical deviancy in the sense of an absolute departure from the stress and intonation rules of the spoken language[3]. The rhythms of poetry, instead of departing from the rhythms of speech, often exaggerate these. Whereas deviant syntax, as we shall see (3.2 below), does not serve to highlight normal syntax, the rhythmical pattern of poetry often helps to make the rhythm of speech more transparent.

(2.2) The rhythms of English poetry

The Russian Formalists isolated three aspects of literary language as essential to their project of establishing a rigorous poetics: sound texture, syntax and semantics. They allotted primacy to the first, defining poetry as "speech organized in its entire phonic texture" (Erlich 1955: 212).

With regard to English poetry, T.S. Eliot argued: "The music of poetry, then, must be a music latent in the common speech of its own time (1957: 31), and G.S. Fraser has pointed out that, "Most great English poetry approximates to speech rather than song" (Fraser 1970: 5). David Murray raises the question of the "oral performance [of poetry] within a society where written texts are culturally privileged" (1989: 21). This may partly explain the current pedagogical neglect of the acoustic aspects of poetry.

Derek Attridge provides Eliot's remarks with a scientific basis. Since English is stress-timed and not syllable-timed, "there are no established English metres in which the number of words or syllables is controlled, but in all verse from Middle English to the present the syllable plays a significant *rhythmic* role" (1982: 52 [my italics]). In syllable-timed languages, such as French and Japanese, "the number of syllables in a line is more important than the number and arrangement of stresses" (ibid.: 72). It has been observed that English tends towards an alternating pattern of weak and strong stresses (Chomsky and Halle: 1968: 117), and one consequence of this is "the overriding preference poets have shown for duple metres" (Attridge 1982: 71).

The implications of this for the pedagogical use of poetry in the English language classroom, are quite clear. If English poetry is based on the patterns of English speech, and in particular the alternation of weak and strong stress with the accompanying use of the unclear vowel ([ə] schwa) that many learners find so difficult to acquire[4], then poetry, with its exaggerated attention to these features can help to make them salient.

The two commonest lines of English verse contain four and five beats or stresses[5]. The former is older, deriving from folk tradition; while the latter is more recent and more 'learned' (Attridge: 123-4), however, a 'naturalistic' reading of the latter will often restore it to a duple (4-beat) rhythm.(ibid.: 129). Many English sentences have four main stresses. (Like that one). This basic fact about the spoken language can be made salient to a class of, say, Japanese high-school students, by the simple expedient of teaching them to scan T.S. Eliot's poem, "The Naming of Cats" and then asking them to suggest what the stressed words may have in common. The stressed words turn out to be the main bearers of meaning, so that if we miss out the intervening (mostly) 'grammatical' words, we are left with a series of telegrammatic lines from which the meaning of the poem can easily be reconstructed:

(The) Náming (of) Cáts (is a) sérious mátter
(It) ísn't (just) óne (of your) hóliday gámes
(You) máy-think (that) Í (am as) mád (as a) hátter
(When I) téll (you a) cát (must have) thrée (different) námes

These four lines exemplify not only the lexical word / grammatical word dichotomy enshrined in the English stress system, but also the other major stress-type: contrastive stress with negation (ísn't, l. 2) or modality (stress shift from main verb to modal auxiliary: thínk → máy think, l. 3). At the micro-level, the major determiner of word-stress in British English is also semantic. Most words which are not French loan-words are stressed on the root. Thus: nám[e] + -ing suffix[6]. This is just one way in which the sound texture of English poetry can be exploited in the English language teaching classroom.

(3.1) Theory into practice: metrics, syntax, rhetoric

Classroom practice[7] based on the three Formalist tenets concerning what to examine in poetry (sound, syntax and sense, with the emphasis on sound) might proceed in the following manner. Having given some instruction in critical meatalanguage, including the two key formalist terms, 'defamiliarization' and 'foregrounding'[8], and scansion[9], we might turn first to metrics and the other formal features of sound texture, such as rhyme, alliteration, assonance, chiasmus and bond-density (Masson 1967; see also Ekdawi 1990).

Syntax would be examined in context, focusing on the ways in which it forwards meaning, and rhetorical devices could be analysed both as a means of enhancing the learners' appreciation of literary techniques and to improve their lexical knowledge.

(3.2) Auden's "Epilogue": a case in point

Auden's "Epilogue" is a prime example of English duple (four-beat) rhythm, and can be approached in the same way as Eliot's "Naming of Cats", for an initial exploration of stress. In examining the other formal acoustic features, our aim is not to point them out in isolation from their semantic function. We are not teaching our students simply to spot alliteration, but also to consider its significance. Rhyme, for example, may be used to foreground key words or concepts, but it is important, as the Formalists recognized, to be aware that rhyme can equally well be a mere convention, in which case, other aspects of the sound-texture may be thrown into relief (foregrounded) by it, instead of the rhyme standing out against a background of 'ordinary' discourse. In Formalist practice, "The devices of poetry are studied not for themselves, but for their defamiliarizing capacity" (Jefferson 1982: 41-2).

Epilogue

'O where are you going?' said reader to rider,
'That valley is fatal when furnaces burn,
Yonder's the midden whose odours will madden,
That gap is the grave where the tall return.'

'O do you imagine,' said fearer to farer,
'That dusk will delay on your path to the pass,
Your diligent looking discover the lacking
Your footsteps feel from granite to grass?'

'O what was that bird,' said horror to hearer,
'Did you see that shape in the twisted trees?
Behind you swiftly the figure comes softly,
The spot on your skin is a shocking disease.'

'Out of this house' –said rider to reader,
'Yours never will' –said farer to fearer,
'They're looking for you –said hearer to horror,
As he left them there, as he left them there.

A good point of departure is to look at words connected by sound, either within a line, or at line-ends, and how this acoustic association affects, or even alters, their meaning[10]. The first, and most prominent such pair is: reader-rider. The similarity of sounds immediately calls to mind the more usual pairing: reader-writer. It is a reasonable assumption that a central concern of most poets, including W. H. Auden, is not horse-riding, or

even travel, but writing, although the choice of metaphor is not without significance, since riding is a swifter mode of travelling than walking, but also natural (or at least non-mechanical). We can distinguish the reader-rider (writer) pair from other, less significant ones, such as 'fatal' - 'furnaces', on (commonsense but also) formal grounds: reader and rider are prominently placed: they introduce the subject of the opening line, first sentence, first verse and whole poem. They constitute the central metaphor (traveller / fearful non-traveller) and reveal the central conceit of the poem: the reader is passive and fearful, while the writer is bold and risk-taking. Yet both are equally vital to the dialogue: the questing rider/writer needs the questioning reader; poetry results from the meeting of the two. Ultimately, however, the reader is a victim of his own trepidation; the writer, a free spirit, can challenge him or leave him behind any time he chooses.

Conveniently for our purposes, sound patterns of various kinds do seem to be the stylistic dominant (Jakobson 1960) of this poem, whereas deviant syntax is minimal[11]. The syntactical structure of the whole echoes the simplicity of the folk tradition in which the four-beat line originates (Attridge 1982: 80). The main syntactical oddity is the ellipsis at the end, where the rider responds to each question in turn, without recalling the questions by repeating part of them. The significance of the singular and plural pronouns in the closing lines might also be raised. The rider orders the reader out; the farer frightens the fearer; the hearer sets horror's own fears to pursue him, and finally the rider asserts his own unitary presence ("he") behind many guises (rider, farer, hearer), and rides (or writes) on, while the reader/fearer/horror remains behind, hopelessly divided and multiplied ("they"); hesitating and thereby lost.

The main rhetorical device is a metaphor: the writer as traveller, taking calculated risks in the face of his reader's caution. Although writer appears to be the tenor of "rider", other vehicles in the poem remain less penetrable. "Valley" has biblical echoes, reinforced by "Graves" and the "tall" (presumably the dead): the valley of the shadow of death, but this valley, although it does appear to put the rider at risk (it can be fatal, under certain conditions), is not exactly the same as the Old Testament one, since it borders on a "gap" where the dead return. A full discussion of the lexical-metaphorical dimensions of the poem is beyond the scope of the present paper. This line of enquiry, however, may prove useful in encouraging the students to explore word-associations in an acoustic context, focusing on connotation, rather than denotation. At an advanced level, it is very important for learners to be aware of this distinction.

Apart from scanning the poem and examining the ways in which the stressed words forward meaning and how this conforms to the rules of stress in English (as we did with the Eliot poem, above 2.2), an advanced group might benefit from two further, related exercises. First, they could be encouraged to clap out the rhythm of the poem, clapping the stressed words more loudly than the unstressed ones, and then they could be asked to consider whether the strong four-beat rhythm evokes anything connected with the message of the poem.* The rhythm might, for example, suggest that of hoof-beats.

Auden's "Epilogue" can be read as a meditation on the nature of poetry, which incidentally reflects the importance to it of sound. It is surely significant that Auden does not employ free verse to talk about poetry. In contrast, in "Musée des beaux arts", which deals with paintings, he avoids acoustic ornament, using a form of free verse that sounds almost conversational. Auden appears to be proposing that a highly ornate verse-form is proper to a discussion of poetry. In electing to employ a form where sound patterning predominates, Auden would seem to be arguing implicitly, as I have been doing more explicitly, that the noises made by poems are semantically, as well as phonologically significant.

Footnotes

* This paper was originally submitted in part-fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of M.Phil. in Applied Linguistics at Trinity College Dublin, 1995. In its revised form, it was presented at the IRAAL Symposium, "Lexicon and Vocabulary: Theory and Practice", Trinity College Dublin, 25 November 1995.

[1] A wide range of courses in English for Special Purposes (E.S.P.), whether vocational (such as medicine), or academic (such as literature) are available in British Council recognised schools of English in Britain. In Ireland, the availability of E.S.P. courses is more restricted, but such courses are offered by three Department of Education recognised schools: U.C.D. Language Centre, the Language Centre of Ireland and Moyle Park College Summer School. The demand for such courses is high in Britain and growing in Ireland.

[2] In 1994, for example, I taught a group of Spanish and Italian undergraduates at Moyle Park. The syllabus that I devised covered English and Anglo-Irish authors (including Modern Irish authors writing in English) and a component called "Issues in Contemporary Linguistics". Classes under this last heading often focused on newspaper articles reporting such issues as the appointment of Jean Aitchison as Murdoch Professor of Linguistics at Oxford and her inaugural lecture on language in the press.

[3] Hollander (1989: 5) points out, for example, that quantitative verse (the basis of Ancient Greek prosody) cannot occur in English, and I myself have demonstrated (D.Phil., Oxford 1991) that Modern Greek poets attempting to write non-metrical free verse almost invariably slip into iambics, the stress-basis of the spoken language.

[4] Schwa: "The indistinct unstressed vowel sound as in **a** moment ago" (O.E.D.). Many languages do not have a corresponding indistinct vowel. Two examples of this are Spanish

and Modern Greek, where all vowels are clearly enunciated, whether stressed or unstressed.

[5] Most nursery rhymes exemplify the four-beat line. An example of a poem in five-beat lines is Gray's *Elegy*.

[6] Hibernno-English, however, like French, stresses most polysyllabic words of Latin origin on the final syllable. Thus: hibernáte, for British English hibernate.

[7] I do not intend this term to imply specific techniques, such as pair work or role-play, which may be appropriate to the learners in question. Obviously, with such advanced learners, the sole language of instruction is the L2 (in this case, English), and use of English dictionaries (rather than bilingual ones) is recommended. A discussion of English language training methodology is beyond the scope of this paper, which is concerned with a very specific area of curriculum: the use of poetry with advanced learners. I am assuming that the teaching techniques necessary for the R.S.A. diploma in English Language teaching are the basic stock-in-trade of any teacher dealing with E.S.P. at this level. A lecturing style of teaching would not be appropriate; learner participation is as vital in E.S.P. as it is in all other areas of E.F.L. teaching. Reading aloud might play a greater part in literature-based E.S.P. courses than in some other, more general language-training lessons, but discussion, pair work, group work, role play and so forth remain an important part of the learning process.

[8] Defamiliarization (*ostranenie*): making strange. Art is regarded as defamiliarizing things that have become automatic or habitrual (Jefferson1982:27). Foregrounding: highlighting particular features (such as words) against a background of more subserviant elements (Jefferson 1982:30).

[9] Scansion: "the metrical scanning of verse" (O.E.D.). See also above: 2.2.

[10] It is not my intention in this section to provide an exhaustive list of all the rhetorical features of Auden's poem. Rather, I am attempting to offer a few examples and make suggestions.

[11] I do not mean that deviant syntax is minimal in the context of ordinary language, but in the context of poetry. Auden uses the archaic apostrophic 'O', for example, and non-standard noun-phrases such as, "Your diligent looking discover the lacking". Here, our concern is with sound-effects, and so the relatively transparent syntax (compared, say, to that of E. E. Cummings) makes this a useful text for advanced learners.

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